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ABSTRACT

Scholars of Israeli children's literature have recently noticed an interesting socio-literary phenomenon: the emergence of an entirely new branch in Israeli children's literature, namely ultra-orthodox children's literature. The books belonging to this special category are easily distinguished from "regular" Israeli children's books by their typical subject content and titles as well as by the fact that their authors and publishers belong to an extremely religious sector. However, despite the great proliferation of these books, scant attention has been paid to this special phenomenon, perhaps because it is relatively new and occurs in a population sector which is remote and isolated from the mainstream literary life in Israel. A study was conducted which had the following objectives: to assess the dimensions and growth rate of the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Children Literature (HCL); to find its main topics and genres; and to gain knowledge concerning its authors' opinions and attitudes towards various facets of Israeli society, as well as the images they paint regarding their own sector. More than 600 HCL books were located for which formal bibliographical details were recorded as well as in-depth content analysis for about 100 books which dealt with present life and reality. The Haredi children's literature which has proliferated recently, differs considerably from the regular Israeli children's literature regarding genre, theme, topic, content, and story-occurrence period. (Contains 27 references.) (AEF)

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Ultra-Orthodox Children's Literature in Israel: A Case Study of Sub-Cultural Children's Literature

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Introduction

Scholars of Israeli children's literature have recently noticed an interesting socio-literary phenomenon: The emergence of an entirely new branch in Israeli children's literature, namely the ultra-orthodox children's literature. The books belonging to this special category are easily distinguished from "regular" Israeli children's books by their typical subject content and titles as well as by the fact that their authors and publishers belong to an extremely religious sector, whose children and educational institutions are the main, if not only, target-population of these books. However, despite the great proliferation of these books, scant attention has been paid to this special phenomenon, perhaps because it is relatively new and occurs in a population sector which is remote and isolated from the mainstream literary life in Israel.

Background

Haredi (ultra-orthodox) is the common name of a minority sector of the Jewish people, usually organized in separate communities in Israel (constituting about 9% of its Jewish population), and in major American and Western European cities. Despite strong religious and emotional ties to the Holy Land, the haredi community does not identify with Zionism as a national- secular ideology, since it considers Jewish existence as meaningful only when identified with the Torah (the Holy classical texts) and its commandments.(1-2) This unique religious sector is characterized by its strict observance of all Jewish commandments, and their commitment to devoted study of Jewish texts, mainly classical ones, like the Talmud, Bible, etc. Therefore, it has its own school system, in which, beyond elementary school, only these classical texts are studied, even many years after the age of 18. The task of these higher institutions ("Yeshivot") is to turn the young **man** into a master-scholar, wholly devoted to the ideals of Torah study and religious self-elevation. While there are very few vocational schools for boys, general and vocational education is provided for **girls**, in high school and beyond, mainly geared towards a teaching career, since they hold that it is only the **men's** duty to study the Torah. However even at girls' schools the emphasis is on religious studies, and general and vocational topics are taught only to the limited extent needed for practical use, considering the fact that the haredi woman is often the main bread- winner of the family. (3-8)

Haredi society places great emphasis on family life, rejects the principle of family planning and upholds personal modesty as an important value, offering its youngsters a genuine alternative to modern secular society and culture, which is regarded as hedonistic, permissive and plagued with social decadence. Stressing personal integrity and mutual assistance, it offers its members a clear sense of identity and social security. To ward off external influences and prevent desertion of religion and tradition, haredi people have tried and actually succeeded to insulate themselves from surrounding secular society and to achieve maximal cultural and social segregation. Trying to minimize their consumption of the secular media, printed and electronic, they have developed their own subculture and recreational activities. Mostly concentrated in separate residential areas they preserve their unique culture and ways of life, wearing distinctive clothing, closing roads on Holydays and upholding modesty in public and at home. They maintain their own institutions: schools, shops, restaurants, travel packages, music, singers and even courts, where civil disputes are judged according to Torah law. (3-8)

Literature Review

Malchi (9-10), Vilian (11) and Hovav (12) were probably among the first attempting to critically analyze this branch of Israeli children's literature. Stressing parallels between the historical development of **HCL (Haredi Children Literature)** and that of general Hebrew

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children's literature, Malchi (9) points out several socio- cultural factors which played an important role in the growth of the HCL, and delineates its main characteristics as revealed in more than fifty such books. Concentrating on children's stories and songs written by three haredi authors, Vilian (11) discussed the problem of writing haredi fiction, the inner world of the haredi child, common genres, themes and motives, and educational- didactic elements, as well as formal and aesthetic ones. Analyzing about then HCL books, Hovav (12) concludes the most of the HCL is **didactic**, rather than realistic, literature, described are usually perfect and one-dimensional, thus sounding artificial and causing possible frustration among the young reader. However, a comprehensive survey, covering most published HCL books, is still lacking and little attention has been paid to authors attitudes towards certain sectors and events in Israeli society, as could be revealed by an in-depth content analysis.

Purpose of the Study

As a preliminary stage towards a full-scale comprehensive study covering most, if not all the HCL, the present study was designed as an exploratory study with the following objectives:

- to assess the dimensions and the growth rate of the HCL.
- to find its main topics and genres.
- to gain knowledge concerning its authors opinions and attitudes towards various facets of the Israeli society, as well as the images they paint regarding their own sector.

Methodology

A preliminary search revealed that no detailed and comprehensive list of HCL books existed, except for very partial and inaccurate lists of booksellers or individual school libraries. Even the periodical listing in the national bibliography quarterly *Kiriat-Sefer* was far from complete, since many HCL publishers and authors do not provide the National Library with the two mandatory copies required by law. Consequently, the books had to be sought in various school and community libraries of the ultra-orthodox sector.

This technique of data gathering has a limitation since it ignores very old books, discarded from the collection due to wear, as well as popular books which are always borrowed out. Concerning the first problem it was assumed that many, if not most, of these old books were republished, and thus returned to the collection. At any rate, their number is probably very small since the growth and development of the HCL is a relatively new phenomenon. To overcome the second obstacle great efforts were made to extend the search to as many libraries as possible, as well as to certain haredi book dealers, thus hoping to "catch" even the popular books. Of an assumed population of about one thousand five hundred HCL books, more than six hundred were located for which formal bibliographical details were recorded as well as in-depth content analysis for about 100 books which dealt with present life and reality.

Findings and Discussion

This special group of HCL books was found to have several unique features which clearly distinguish it from the rest of children's books published in Israel.

Growth

The distribution of books according to year of publication indicates an enormous increase which started in the 1970's, and gained greater momentum from 1980 on: about 70% of the books were published from 1980 on, vs. 23% during 1970-1979, and about 7% during the former two decades (1950-1969). These findings corroborate Malchi's (9) analysis of *Kiriat-Sefer* listings that between 1970 and 1989 the proportion of HCL books rose from about 5% of the total number of children's books published in Israel to about 20%. The reasons for this rapid increase were probably an interesting combination of demographic and socio-educational factors. The haredi sector, the target-population of these books, has large families (6 children on average), (2) thus creating a vast potential market of young book consumers. At the same time, spiritual and educational leaders of this sector strongly oppose, on ideological grounds, any use of "secular" media, both published and electronic, including children's books. Arguing correctly that there is no value-free literature, including for youth, (13-18) they insist that youngsters be exposed only to

children's books which carry their values and ideology and educate towards them. Thus, reading remains the main recreational activity for these children, who watch no television, creating a strong demand for books. (19)

Genre

A genre analysis shows most of the books (about 68%) to be long or short stories, 28% - biographies or folk legends, and only a very small fraction (4%) - poetry, fables or diaries. However, a further analysis into more detailed genres reveals that, books dealing with present life realities, children's adventures or gang stories, comprise only about 36%, unlike the general Israeli children's literature, in which they form the vast majority. One-third of the books are biographies or stories of famous Rabbis (i.e. spiritual leaders) from ancient or recent times (21%), or stories and legends of the Old Sages, derived from ancient Jewish literature and retold in modern Hebrew, adapted to younger ages (13%). Another 16% are historical stories with real or fictitious characters, based on certain events from the long history of the Jewish people, in their homeland and during two thousand years of exile, or stories dealing with the Holy towns in the Holy Land. More than 10% of the books deal with the Jewish Holydays. Commandments of the Jewish Law, ethics and virtues. In only a small fraction (2%) is nature (plants and animals) the main theme of the book.

Story-Occurrence Period

Resulting from the aforementioned different division of genres, the distribution of periods in which the stories took place is entirely different too: the plots of about one-third of the books occurred during ancient times, from the Patriarch Abraham to the end of the Middle Ages, another one-third occurred between 1500 and 1920, and only about 30% occurred from the 1930's on.

Content Analysis

The most impressing unique features are revealed in a content analysis of these books, especially those dealing with present life stories. Due to imposed space limitations it was impossible to cite from these books in order to illustrate the following conclusions, thus inevitably presented in a condensed form.

Several books portray a negative picture of "secular" society in Israel, which is, more or less, a typical modern western society. The literary characters belonging to this society are sometimes depicted as ignorant of their rich historical heritage, often intolerant and disrespectful towards the Jewish religion and its followers. They lead an immoral and licentious life style, pursuing only career and material success, but remaining with feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction. They look for cheap, shallow and superficial entertainment, to provide them with instant satisfaction, thus finding themselves chained to the television or video set. Many such characters are described as mentally restless, dissatisfied with their life style, suffering of spiritual confusion, and seeking the deep internal truth of life. Eventually, most of them repent, return to their religious and national roots, finding their long-sought peace of mind.

Comparing the secular society to the religious one, some authors point to the inferiority of the former, which held positive values and ideals in former pioneer generations, but gradually lost them following statehood. This erosion and deterioration of ideals and values is reflected also in the educational system which raises nationally rootless graduates, who frequently do not hesitate to leave their homeland and abandon their own people. (20-21)

On the individual level, the non-religious family too is usually described in a negative manner, depicting the parents as people whose main interests lie in their career, leaving little time, energy and understanding for their children. The woman, preoccupied with her career, looks down at her housework, leaving to the nurse the education of her only son, and showering him with expensive clothing and toys as compensation for the motherly warmth he lacks.

An even worse image is reflected of the Kibbutz, the world- famous Israeli innovation, regarded by many in Israel and abroad as one of the prominent symbols of the new Israel. Its members are depicted as ignorant in Jewish culture and history, and as leading a reckless and permissive style of life, especially concerning marriage. (18)

To understand it one should recall that the secular Kibbutz and the Kibbutz movement symbolize for the haredi community and doctrinal and fundamental uncompromising struggle against religion and its followers. The Kibbutz is perceived as the crusader of the militant socialist-communist secularism which adapted the Marxist conception regarding religion. (22-23)

This is not the proper place to discuss in detail the question to what extent these negative descriptions reflect reality. There is no doubt that such characters do exist and similar events did occur (20-23), but to what extent do they represent the **common every day reality?** Indeed, there are some Israelis who advocate a democratic-secular state, multi-national and multi-religious, separated from the Jewish religion and heritage, and denuded of its Jewish content and symbols. (24-26) However, a recent comprehensive survey of "Beliefs, Observances and Social Interaction Among Israeli Jews" indicated that the supporters of this ideology constitute only a small minority, while the vast majority prefers Israel as a Jewish state and adheres to many customs and symbols of the Jewish religion and heritage. (27)

As could be expected, the life of the haredi family is described in HCL books as tranquil, harmonious and satisfying, and the relations within the family are of love and friendship. The father is usually not home until late in the day, since he is busy studying Torah with his Yeshivah-mates. Thus, in many of the stories the mother plays the central role, and the children refer to her, since she is more available. She is a very hard worker, often tired and her daily schedule is overloaded, with almost no time left for recreational or leisure activities. Most stories emphasize her duties at home as mother and housewife, home and children being the center of her life. She is always busy caring for her children and the tasks are the traditional ones: kitchen, laundry, shopping, etc. Sometimes she works outside the home too, not as a career-woman, but rather to supplement her husband's income, allowing better conditions for the children. Her personality reflects austerity, efficiency, modesty, chastity, honesty, devotion, warmness and kindness. She is proud of her husband's devoted study of the Torah, and makes utmost efforts to enable him undisturbed study.

The haredi child characters are depicted in a similar positive way, loving their family and dedicated to it. The authors do not ignore the existence of frequent problems, weaknesses and frictions but the end if always happy: with the parents' patience and understanding, using educational methods, the child learns to overcome these problems and to fulfill his duties, including helping with housework. While all children strictly observe the religious commandments, especially the fifth one of the Decalogue, boys and girls differ. The former are happy with study of the Torah and prepare themselves towards this lofty ultimate goal, and the latter are reared towards building a Jewish home, in which they will fulfill women's traditional tasks.

Conclusions

The haredi children's literature which has proliferated recently, differs considerably from the regular Israeli children's literature regarding genres, themes, topics, content and story-occurrence periods.

Many of the images and descriptions are stereotypical in nature. Indeed, they have certain basis in reality, but the factual points are generalized by the authors in a manner, which does not always accurately reflect reality.

Some of the negative descriptions can be explained by reminiscences of ideological and political conflicts, mainly over religious, cultural and educational issues, between the haredi and religious sectors and the state authorities, from the 1950's and onwards. (1, 2, 19)

As pointed out by Hovav, (12) the HCL is a **didactic** children's literature, motivated by the authors' educational goals, who feel "recruited" and committed to this religious-national mission. This obviously a didactic-educational approach is a means in their continuous struggle against negative influences of the secular world surrounding them, with all its components, many of which are very tempting for children and youths.

Sociologically, this children's literature could be viewed as one of the means by which a religious-cultural minority attempts to educate its young generation, according to a certain sub-culture, with maximal separation from the surrounding general secular culture.

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